

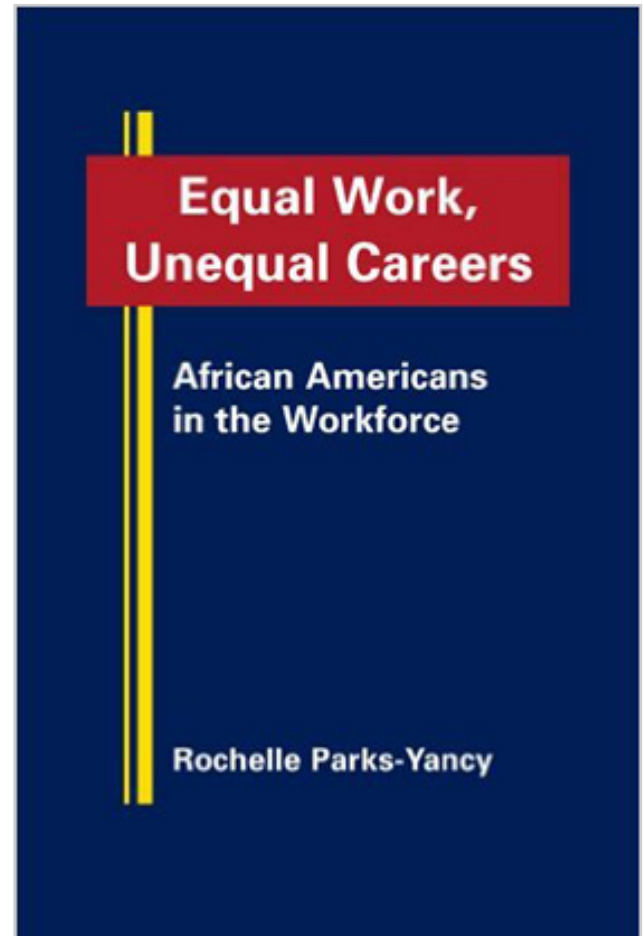
Social capital and career advancement for African Americans

Equal Work, Unequal Careers: African Americans in the Workforce. By Rochelle Parks-Yancy. Boulder, CO: FirstForumPress, 2010, 153 pp., \$55/hardback.

In the spring of 2015, the Congressional Black Caucus' 46-member diversity task force sponsored Tech 2020 in Washington, DC—and it let the tech industry know that it “meant business” when it asked that a large segment of the industry’s new hires in the next 5 years be African Americans. The request has made Rochelle Parks-Yancy’s book *Equal Work, Unequal Careers: African Americans in the Workforce*, published by FirstForumPress in 2010, particularly relevant.

When Google released its diversity figures in 2013, the public learned that 83 percent of its workforce was men and 60 percent was White, with only 1 percent Black. Company leadership was 72 percent White, 23 percent Asian, 2 percent Black, and 1 percent Hispanic. But the proportion of Blacks has lagged behind that of Whites in almost every industry, Parks-Yancy points out.

Early in her book, she says that studies indicate that 80 percent of all jobs are found through social capital—capital that African Americans, whether highly educated or not, have lacked. In addition, both the amount and type of education that individuals attain are closely related to the extent of information and influence embedded in their social networks. Whites are more likely than Blacks to complete college, and there are considerable differences in students’ choices of college majors. Blacks often major in education and social work, as opposed to business, engineering, or computer science.



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Also, African Americans and women have been systematically directed to seemingly high-profile positions that are, in fact, of low organizational value and do not afford entry into the firms' power structure. The jobs they occupy are primarily in personnel, public relations, and affirmative action capacities.

Notably, Parks-Yancy, associate professor of management in the Jesse H. Jones School of Business at Texas Southern University, finds that White women, like Blacks, often lack the social capital that is important to career success, so she includes these women with Blacks in her analysis. However, she does say that White students who are graduated from high school are more likely to find a job through personal relationships than are African Americans, who instead receive more help from institutional sources: employment agencies, student career offices, and the like.

Parks-Yancy points out that a number of nonprofit and government social programs offer social and financial support to youths from disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs give a "leg up" to those who fail to have access to social capital in their own sphere or to those whose resources offer few career returns.

Nonetheless, African American workers who are downsized or fired from a relatively high-status position may take longer to find a similar job, given their paucity of social ties on the job. And the same goes for women. Moreover, social capital is important to moving up within an organization, as well as changing jobs across organizations. Progressing at work includes being promoted, having access to specialized training, being assigned to major projects, and more. But when African Americans or women seek to advance their careers, they often have to obtain information and influence from colleagues and managers who are White males. Layoffs can be especially difficult for both Blacks and women, because the managers for whom they once worked, and who might have taken them with them when they moved up, may be gone.

Still, Blacks have found opportunity at all levels of government in which civil rights legislation has been actively supported. Included in government are the staffs of public schools at all levels. Some geographic areas that are hubs for particular industries or for government agencies have offered more opportunity to qualified applicants than other areas have: witness the migration of blacks from the Deep South several generations or so ago on the perception that the District of Columbia offered greater opportunity to aspiring Blacks.

The author points out that a number of African Americans have access to social capital resources from philanthropic organizations, universities, corporate programs, and work-related contacts that took an interest in them. Without these interventions, historically disadvantaged groups would probably remain so within and across generations.

Parks-Yancy recommends networking for a college-educated Black student seeking a job. One possibility is getting to know key professors, who may be a conduit to an internship or a job referral. A student can achieve this aim by consistently visiting the professor and discussing the subject matter with him or her, the author observes. Then she says, "If the executive of a major corporation speaks to students about his or her career, students should make a concentrated effort to talk with that speaker after their presentation. This includes introducing themselves, discussing their career ambitions, discussing potential job opportunities, and obtaining the presenter's business card."

She also says that middle-class or working-class African Americans who are not students can use a similar technique: keeping in touch with mentors, getting involved in activities related to their work, participating in civic

and social programs, and actively networking with all adults who are in such programs. Career management also includes membership and active involvement in professional organizations—involvement that can lead to accessing a variety of social capital resources.